

# Film for Fluency

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*By Kate M. Donley*

American movies and television programs offer an excellent opportunity for intermediate-level students to develop fluency in English. Intermediate-level students are at a frustrating stage in their development of learning English. They are too advanced for shows prepared for language learners such as “Family Album, U.S.A.” yet they do not know enough English to benefit significantly from exposure to programs for native speakers. Although students enjoy simply watching videos in English, this passive activity does not lead to appreciable learning.

For fluency to develop, the teacher must provide students with structured activities and discussion used in combination with the videotaped material. I advocate using “viewing sheets” consisting of easy multiple-choice questions, which the students answer as they watch the video. Previewing and post viewing discussions are conducted in conjunction with the viewing sheets. As they listen to the dialogue in the program, answer the questions on the viewing sheets, and discuss the questions and events in the program, students will use three of the four major skill areas of language learning. I call this three-pronged approach Film for Fluency. This technique was highly effective for my high school English classes in Uzbekistan. Students adored the movies and attendance at the English club doubled.

Although it appears at first glance that the students learn language directly from movies or television shows, in fact they learn primarily from the viewing sheet. The language in Hollywood movies and American television shows is too fast, too difficult, and too idiomatic for an intermediate-level student to follow. For this reason, viewing questions are based on very clear and easy segments of dialogue and obvious visual clues in the program. This enables students to answer questions at their level. Answering these easy questions keeps students involved in the program and focused on the lesson. After viewing a section, students are able to measure their own listening and reading comprehension based on the accuracy of their answers to the viewing questions. This obvious indicator of progress keeps students optimistic and motivated during the lesson.

## Using Film for Fluency

To succeed, this technique requires a significant amount of teacher preparation. In addition to the viewing sheets, the teacher may need to create visual aids diagramming aspects of the program such as characters, locations, or major events in the plot. Also, a list of easy questions might assist teachers when facilitating the previewing and post-viewing sessions.

A typical 45-minute class using this technique will roughly follow this timetable:

5 minutes	<b>teacher's introduction or review discussion</b> of events of the movie
5 minutes	<b>previewing</b> by reading ten questions from the viewing sheet, discussing any vocabulary, and predicting the answers to the questions

10 minutes	<b>viewing</b> a segment of the program
5 minutes	<b>post viewing</b> by answering the questions and discussing the events in the 10-minute segments of the program
5 minutes	<b>previewing</b> the next segment of the program
10 minutes	<b>viewing</b> the next segment
5 minutes	<b>post viewing</b> discussion

As seen from this overview, it takes 45 minutes of class time to show 20 minutes of one program. Nevertheless, this technique is very flexible and can be integrated into a curriculum in many ways. An intermediate-level class or club can watch a movie once a week as a serial over the course of a month. Alternately, an entire week of classes can be devoted to one program or movie. Film for Fluency can be a savior during times when students are unusually distracted—for example, the week before winter or summer vacation or the few days before a holiday.

## Selecting the Program

The genre of the movie the teacher chooses is important. Dramas and comedies are too wordy and usually require knowledge of idioms or vocabulary that is beyond intermediate-level students. The program selected must be age-appropriate, culturally appropriate, and interesting to both boys and girls. Action and adventure movies are an excellent medium for Film for Fluency; engaging events occur on screen and difficult dialogue is minimal.

I selected the science fiction movie *Star Trek: First Contact* for a group of low-level intermediates. Initially the amount of scientific jargon distracted students and the rapid pace of speech frustrated them, although they liked the different alien characters and special effects. Nevertheless, after three classes their comprehension had improved noticeably. Cliffhangers in the action movie *The River Wild* had my students gripping the edges of their desks. By far the most successful movie was *E.T.* I showed it to a mixed-level group that contained many beginners. Although the viewing sheet was difficult for the beginners, everyone empathized with E.T.'s quest to "phone home." Many of my students were in tears by the end of the movie. Adventure classics such as *Star Wars*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* guarantee success with intermediate-level students.

As most movies are between an hour and a half and two hours in length, the short length of television shows has an advantage. Instead of the five or seven classes it takes to finish a movie, a television program can be completed in two or three sessions. Even commercials could be incorporated into viewing questions.

## Viewing Sheets

The viewing sheet is essential in the lesson presentation and greatly enhances students' comprehension of the movie. Because students tend to panic if they have too many questions to answer in one section, I recommend ten questions per ten-minute section. Viewing questions

should be multiple-choice, with a maximum of three choices. This way students only need to write the question number and “a,” “b,” or “c.”

If viewing questions contain references to turning points in the plot or important dialogue, prepare students during the previewing discussion. Viewing questions that titillate students create exciting previewing discussions. A question can produce anticipation and disagreement among students when they are asked to predict the answer. Question 1. (based on Star Trek: First Contact) is an example of such a question :

1. Commander Data (a) kisses, (b) shoots, (c) eats the Queen.

Remember that the language component of the lesson is actually the viewing sheet. The vocabulary in the questions should be almost entirely review. The purpose of this technique is to promote fluency, not vocabulary enrichment. Too many new lexical items or idioms will complicate the lesson and divert the focus from fluency. The best viewing questions are simple, focusing on easily understandable events in the program. Here are some examples of viewing questions from The r Wild:

2. Wade gives Rourke (a) \$50, (b) \$100, (c) \$200 for his birthday.

3. Tom thinks that it is (a) too much, (b) not money.

4. Wade's secret is (a) money, (b) a gun, (c) gold in a bag.

5. Tom leaves while (a) Terry, (b) Gail, (c) Wade washes in the waterfall.

6. (a) Two, (b) three, (c) four rivers join at The Gauntlet.

7. Wade hits Rourke because he (a) is a bad boy, (b) broke his promise.

8. Tom writes (a) “SOS,” (b) “help us,” (c) “he has a gun” in the sand.

9. Tom (a) dies, (b) swims, (c) climbs the rocks to safety.

10. Tom wants Gail to go (a) slower, (b) faster, (c) much faster.

## **Preparing Materials**

The goal of the prepared materials is to create familiarity with the movie or television show. Confusion about events or characters distracts students from answering the questions on the viewing sheet. Familiarizing students in advance with both the content of the program and the questions on the viewing sheet leads to greater comprehension and enjoyment. Fortunately, once the viewing sheets, charts, and questions are prepared they may be used often for different classes.

First, watch the program at least once and take notes. Write down information about events in the plot, characters, locations, and anything else that may confuse students. Break the program into roughly ten-minute segments as you watch and keep track of the segments in your notes. Also note any instances of dialogue that are especially easy to understand. Effective viewing questions focus on easy dialogue or visual clues. Base the viewing questions on the information notes.

New vocabulary that is critical to understanding the program is easily and quickly explained with visual aids. A chart with pictures of new vocabulary is especially helpful for students as a quick reference while watching the video. Other visual aids that list the characters and their distinguishing features or family relationships may be necessary. Each program will need different kinds of visual aids. *Star Trek: First Contact* required the most charts: the officers of the *Starship Enterprise* and their features (bald, brown hair, etc.), the types of weapons, the different star ships, and the kinds of aliens. Because *The River Wild* contained multiple references to a river landscape, I drew a picture and labeled the different features of the river ecosystem. *E.T.* needed only a family tree showing the characters' names and relationships.

## Using Your Materials in Class

Film for Fluency has four steps: the pre-viewing discussion, the program viewing, the postviewing discussion, review.

- **Previewing:** During the previewing discussion introduce vocabulary and important events with visual aids, read over the questions, and ask students to predict the answers to the questions. A good previewing discussion interests students in the forthcoming segment.
- **Viewing:** Each student should have a copy of the viewing sheet. As the students watch the program, they answer the questions in their notebook. Insist on individual work and minimize interruptions, as talking distracts other students.
- **Postviewing discussion:** After the section ends, groups can summarize the events that occurred. Next, discuss the answers to the questions. Ask different kinds of questions to check comprehension, and solicit students' opinions of developments in the film. Ask students how many questions they were able to answer correctly.
- **Review:** At the beginning of the following class, briefly review the events, characters, or vocabulary from the most recent segment of the program.

Undoubtedly the language in the movies or television programs will overwhelm students, but reassure them that they only need to learn the content of the viewing sheets. Although students might want to discuss answers among themselves or disrupt the viewing period with questions, presenting a thorough introduction to the technique should minimize confusion. Emphasize that all questions may be asked during the post-viewing discussion. It may be helpful to answer one or two questions from the viewing sheet. Explain that students will adapt to the actors' accents and pace of speech after one or two classes. After the first class, students will understand the routine of Film for Fluency, and the class should go smoothly thereafter.

If students experience difficulty understanding a crucial scene, consider replaying it for them. However, it is not important for students to understand every scene or plot twist. Gleaning the main ideas from each section is sufficient for answering questions and participating in discussion. After a few classes, re-play a part of the movie students initially had difficulty understanding. A repeat viewing proves to students that their comprehension becomes easier with practice. Ask them if they understand the particular scene in the video better. The students will be thrilled as they observe their listening comprehension improving.

## **Film for Fluency Teaching Culture**

My students in Uzbekistan had seen a considerable amount of American entertainment exports. Movies and television shows from the United States were shown on local television dubbed in Uzbek and Russian. Although American entertainment was a part of their environment, it had not helped them to learn English. Unfortunately, the majority of broadcasts consisted of old television shows and violent action movies. Therefore, it was a pleasure to introduce students to movies like E.T. Not only did it broaden their idea of American movies, it also developed their understanding of American culture. For example, my students had never understood the holiday Halloween until they saw the characters in E.T. wear costumes and participate in “trick or treat.” Although presenting entertainment as cultural reality has the potential to give students the wrong idea about American culture, the postviewing discussion provides a valuable opportunity for students to ask questions about the unfamiliar culture they screen.

## **Conclusion**

American films and television shows are a tremendous resource for teachers of intermediate-level students. These programs are often more entertaining and exciting than videos developed to teach EFL. However, without a framework, it is difficult for teachers to effectively utilize this resource. Viewing sheets promote understanding of key events and provide an outline for discussion. During the lesson, students actively listen and participate in conversations about a topic, thus developing critical aspects of fluency. The Film for Fluency technique gives teachers and students a structure to maximize language learning, so that students do more than just watch television.

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